

# America's rural roads: Quiet but deadly, new report finds

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A new report reveals a hidden secret about the nation's beautiful rural

roads: They're too often fatal for motorists.

Nearly half of all U.S. crashes happen on [rural roads](#), despite only 19% of Americans living in those areas. The report, conducted by the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), details why and what can be done to prevent these [fatal crashes](#).

"Roads are the backbone of rural America, connecting far-flung communities and families. While cities and [urban areas](#) have alternatives to driving, that's not the case for people in [rural areas](#)," GHSA executive director Jonathan Adkins said in an association news release.

"Unfortunately, the dangerous and deadly driving behaviors that have increased during the pandemic have taken an oversized toll on [rural residents](#). Making rural roads safer is essential for achieving the national goal of zero fatalities," Adkins added.

Traffic fatalities are soaring nationwide, the GHSA noted. Rural road deaths had fallen for several years prior to the pandemic, but they increased in 2020, as happened on other types of roads across the country. Numbers of deaths on all types of rural roads—including interstate, arterial and collector/local—grew again in 2021, according to preliminary National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) [data](#).

Reasons for the dangers on rural roads include lack of safety resources, simpler roadway infrastructure, poor emergency [medical services](#) and risky driver behaviors, such as not wearing a seat belt, impaired driving, speeding and distraction.

The new analysis of Fatality Analysis Reporting System data found that men were more at risk than women, by two to one. Over a five-year period, nearly 60,000 men died in rural road crashes, compared to just

over 25,000 women.

Young drivers also had more significant risk. Fatalities on rural roads for drivers ages 14 and 15 spiked in 2020 by 57%. Young drivers are at risk well into their 20s, the report found, with the highest crash rates of any age group. Fatality rates then decline with age until the mid-40s, when they begin climbing again.

While adults aged 65 and older are 19% of the rural population, they accounted for 21% of rural road deaths.

About 58% of U.S. motor vehicle occupants killed in rural road crashes during the five-year period were not wearing [seat belts](#).

[Speeding](#) was a factor in 27% of rural road deaths. About 46% of all speeding fatalities happen on rural roads. States that have high maximum speed limits tend to have higher per capita rates of fatalities on rural roads than states with lower maximum speed limits, the report found.

About 43% of alcohol-related motor vehicle fatalities occurred on a rural road. Data is incomplete on drug-involved fatalities, but officials know that drug-impaired drivers killed at least 2,644 people on rural roads in 2020. It is likely more, according to the study authors.

About 46% of fatalities related to [distracted driving](#) happened on rural roads. Over five years, about 7,700 people died on rural roads in crashes involving driver distraction. There also may be more of these deaths because it can be difficult for [law enforcement](#) or crash scene investigators to determine if a driver was distracted at the time of a crash.

The study findings are scheduled to be presented during a panel session on Sept. 20 at the GHSA annual meeting in Louisville, Ky.

The report is "[America's Rural Roads: Beautiful and Deadly](#)."

**More information:** The U.S. Department of Transportation has more on [safe driving](#).

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